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Multilingualism

Questions relating to information

Pattern of conferences

Letter dated 31 July 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In my capacity as Chairman of the Arab Group for the month of July 2001 and on behalf of the members of the League of Arab States, I have the honour to inform you that the Arab Group is deeply concerned by declining standards in the provision of Arabic language services both in the conference services context and in United Nations information activities. This deterioration would confirm that there is, within the United Nations system, discrimination in the treatment accorded to the official languages on the one hand and to the working languages, especially English, on the other.

I should be grateful if you would have this letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly under items 43, 101 and 136 of the provisional agenda.

(*Signed*) Nassir Abdulaziz **Al-Nasser**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations
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* A/56/150.

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Annex to the letter dated 31 July 2001 from the Permanent Representative of Qatar to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

The Arab Group believes that the Secretariat of the United Nations, as represented by the Secretary-General, should spare no effort to promote the objectives and aspirations of all Member States and should do so by employing all the means and resources necessary to overcome any obstacles that might prevent them from achieving the goals to which they aspire, including the optimum utilization of Arabic language services throughout the United Nations system.

Accordingly, and in view of the constantly deteriorating situation of the Arabic language at the United Nations as illustrated by the facts that come to light on a daily basis and give rise to simultaneous concern and puzzlement, the Arab Group has formed the view that it is essential to redress this tangible deterioration in the standard of Arabic language services, including translation and interpretation, in all the activities of the United Nations and in all of its organs and bodies. The Arab Group would therefore like to cite some of the concerns that stem from the issues and situations that arise on a daily basis and provide an index of the depth of the problem. Appropriate solutions may then be formulated by those concerned in the Secretariat. We present to you hereunder some of the concerns in question.

1. Arabic is a working language of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), and all of the Commission's members are Arabic-speaking countries. It is nevertheless to be noted that less than 50 per cent of ESCWA publications are issued in Arabic. **We therefore urge the Secretary-General to take all necessary measures to ensure that all of the Commission's publications are issued in Arabic.**

2. We note that in preparing reports of the Secretary-General for submission to the principal organs of the United Nations the Secretariat does not adhere to the terminology employed in the resolutions of those organs. It thus seeks to ignore the political, economic, social and technical purport of the terms in question, to the detriment of the national interests of Member States.

3. We should like to recall that in paragraph 5 of section III ("Documentation- and publication-related matters") of its resolution 55/222, the General Assembly:

> "Decides that there should not be any exemption to the rule that documents must be distributed in all official languages, and emphasizes the principle that all documents must be distributed simultaneously in all official languages before they are made available on United Nations web sites."

The Arab Group notes that Secretariat officials seek to ignore this rule when they refer delegations to the electronic versions of reports of the Secretary-General and reports of subsidiary bodies of the United Nations for decisions to be taken in their regard. There can be no doubt that this practice constitutes disregard for this particular mandate, for the rule that the six official languages must be equal, for General Assembly resolution 50/11 and for the six-week rule for the distribution of United Nations documents. **The Arab Group therefore asks that this rule be observed and requests that the attention of Secretariat officials should be drawn to the need for meticulous compliance with it.**

4. If Arabic is to be treated as an official language of the United Nations, then the Secretariat must do its utmost to secure all the necessary technically qualified interpreters and translators, personnel who have the necessary expertise and competence to cope with Arabic grammar and usage and with the technical terminology employed, and it must instruct those in charge in the Arabic Translation Service and the Arabic Interpretation Section that it is meanings and concepts that must be translated and not merely vocabulary items and that the terminology used in the various Arabic translation and interpretation services in the United Nations system must be standardized, in implementation of General Assembly resolution 54/248 D.

5. **We urge the Secretary-General to restore the practice of issuing annexes to documents of the principal organs of the United Nations simultaneously in all six official languages and to instruct the officials responsible to treat all six official languages equally and not to practise selectivity in the issuance and distribution of such annexes.**

6. It has become evident that there are some United Nations documents that the Secretariat has no interest in issuing in the six official languages, specifically documents for which circulation is required under agenda items of the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council, especially when they are more than 20 pages long. Examples include the lengthy documents issued by the summits of the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries. A specific example of such neglect is document A/56/89-E/2001/89, which is a letter from the Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People addressed to the Secretary-General. The Secretariat contented itself with issuing only the request for circulation as a document in all six official languages, thus disregarding the legislative mandates requiring that all United Nations documents should be circulated in those languages. In order to avoid any recurrence of such cases, **we expect the Secretary-General to give the necessary instructions to ensure that the Secretariat undertakes to translate all United Nations documents into all the other official languages of the Organization simultaneously, including documents for which circulation is requested under agenda items of the principal deliberative bodies of the United Nations regardless of their length**.

7. In accordance with rules 78 and 120 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly, the Secretariat must circulate draft resolutions and draft decisions to all delegations not later than the day preceding the relevant meeting. Needless to say, such drafts must be circulated in the six official languages before being adopted. Pursuant to these provisions, **we urge the Secretary-General and the relevant Secretariat officials to comply with the rule that no draft resolutions or decisions should be distributed and no proposals should be presented or put to the vote at any committee meeting until copies have been circulated, simultaneously in the six official languages of the United Nations, to all delegations not later than the day preceding the meeting, thus ensuring respect for the rules of procedure of the General Assembly**.

8. Rule 54 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly states that:

> "Verbatim or summary records shall be drawn up as soon as possible in the languages of the General Assembly."

It is to be noted, however, that the Secretariat has clearly been dilatory in issuing such records for the fifty-fifth session of the General Assembly. **We therefore urge the Secretary-General to take all necessary measures to ensure respect for rule 54 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly and to issue records in the six official languages simultaneously and with the necessary dispatch**.

9. Rule 59 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly states that:

> "Resolutions adopted by the General Assembly shall be communicated by the Secretary-General to the Members of the United Nations within 15 days after the close of the session."

The Arab Group notes that this rule has been persistently violated, to the extent that it is no longer applied by the Secretariat. What we have in mind are the individual resolutions before they are assembled into a volume of the Official Records. **We therefore urge the Secretary-General to ensure compliance with rule 59 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly and to communicate the resolutions of the Assembly, specifically the individual resolutions before they are assembled into a volume, to the Members of the United Nations simultaneously in the six official languages of the Organization within 15 days after the close of the session**. This would give effect to General Assembly resolution 50/11, in paragraph 6 of which the Assembly "Recalls the need to ensure the simultaneous distribution of such documents in the official languages".

10. While acknowledging that typographical errors and inadvertent mistakes are inevitable, it has become evident that errors made in the translation of documents into Arabic have become more frequent. One of the reasons for this is increased reliance on self-revision and the failure to assign a sufficient number of revisers. The General Assembly has on more than one occasion drawn the attention of the Secretariat to this situation. **We therefore urge the Secretary-General to accord the necessary attention to language reviser posts and to reduce reliance on self-revision to the maximum extent possible**.

11. **We emphasize the importance of the availability of specialists at the Dag Hammarskjöld Library to provide Arabic-language services in cataloguing and collection maintenance, to facilitate the use of reference works and documents in Arabic by delegations and to upgrade the Library's holdings of Arabic reference works and books in all fields.**

12. The Arab Group believes in the principle of multilingualism, and it believes that the Department of Public Information must fulfil its mandate to disseminate and make available information about the United Nations and its activities in all the official languages of the Organization. Paragraph 7 of the report of the Secretary-General contained in document A/AC.198/2001/8 states that "progress [in the multilingual development of the United Nations web site] has been slower than expected due to a lack of in-house expertise and resources in the non-working languages of the Secretariat". In paragraph 8 of the report it is also stated that "in order to ensure the regular maintenance and enhancement of the web site" the Department of Public Information "needs a sound foundation in terms of staffing and resources" and that a "study ... will need to be undertaken in order to ascertain the requirements with respect to staffing, technology and content for the true multilingual development of the United Nations web site". In this connection the Arab Group refers to document A/AC.198/2001/L.3 of 10 May 2001, containing the recommendations of the Committee on Information to the General Assembly. In paragraph 18 of draft resolution B, under "Multilingualism and public information" (section III), the Assembly would request the Secretary-General "to ensure that the Department of Public Information has appropriate staffing capacity in all official languages of the United Nations to undertake all its activities"; in paragraph 19 it would remind him "of the need to include in future programme budget proposals for the Department of Public Information the importance of using all six official languages in its activities"; and in paragraph 20 it would request the Department of Public Information to make "specific recommendations towards achieving the goal of making all documentation on the web sites available in all six official languages of the Organization". We would hope, in this connection, that the Secretary-General's programme budget proposal for the Department of Public Information will take account to the reaffirmation by the Committee on Information of the importance of equality among the six official languages on the United Nations web sites in accordance with the relevant resolutions on the Department of Public Information calling for such equality. **We therefore express the wish that the Secretary-General would redress this imbalance with all due dispatch by means of proposals for all the financial and human resources necessary to address all of the concerns relating to the equality of the six official languages of the United Nations or by the reallocation of resources among the web sites in the six official languages in such a way as to achieve that equality.**

Belief in multilingualism at the United Nations, an organization of a universal character representing a plurality of civilizations and the diverse cultural identities of its Member States, requires that equality among the languages it uses should be a fixed principle espoused by the Secretariat in both letter and spirit.